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Understanding Jesus in the Early Modern Period and Beyond : Editorial

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Abstract: This thematic issue seeks to provide a more nuanced and more complicated history of how historical narratives about the life of Jesus were produced and circulated in European culture. The focus on media is one of the most innovative ways to provide such an involved history, pointing to the cultural history of scholarship and the many ways in which societies produce historical representations of theological themes.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25364/05.4:2019.1.1>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-171264>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Facchini, Cristiana; von Wyss-Giacosa, Paola (2019). Understanding Jesus in the Early Modern Period and Beyond : Editorial. *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, 5(1):7-12.

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Understanding Jesus in the Early Modern Period and Beyond

Editorial

The exceptional and yet very human life of Jesus has been represented in a vast breadth of forms, from the visual to the textual, forming intertextual relationships that are highly complex in encompassing chronologically and geographically varied cultures.

Since the inception of Christianity and its separation from Judaism, canonical and extracanonical sources have provided nuanced and contradictory biographical information about Jesus, his birth and childhood, his early adulthood and his religious ministry. Gospel narratives describe at length the Nazarene's acts and words before turning to his dramatic and violent end, with his arrest, torture and death on the cross.

Intensified attention, especially in the form of precise historical knowledge, appears to have been given to Jesus' biography in times of conflict. The search for sources and documents that might provide accurate information about his life has been central to intra-Christian debate since the time of the Reformation. During the period of the "radical Enlightenment" a particularly polemical historiographical tradition took shape, which, bolstered by the rise of modernity, was eventually to become influential in the political and cultural public arenas.¹

A genuinely historiographical approach, aiming at a more accurate and more detailed reconstruction of the historical person and images of Jesus was a hallmark of 19th-century scholarly efforts. According to the eminent theologian Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), a rationalist genius of the Enlightenment, the Hamburg theologian Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1698–1768), had been at the forefront of this scholarly endeavor.² Schweitzer was relying on selected fragments of Reimarus' Deist work published in the 1770s by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. The complete *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (An Apology for, or Some Words in Defense of, Reasoning Worshipers of God) was edited and published only in 1972.³ In Schweitzer's historiographical account, which covers the entire 19th century, great relevance is attributed to

1 Schweitzer 1906.

2 Mulsow 2011, Groetsch 2015.

3 Edited by Gerhard Alexander; see Reimarus 1972.

German theological scholarship and its achievements in the field of biblical exegesis, which were also influential in other European countries. Indeed, in the 19th century some historical biographies of Jesus had achieved great success. In 1835, the liberal theologian David Strauss (1808–1874) published his *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*). This pioneering study, a historical investigation of the life story of Jesus, was as controversial as it was influential. A few decades later, *Vie de Jésus* (*Life of Jesus*) by the French Orientalist Ernest Renan became a bestseller in France and was soon translated into other European languages.⁴ These historical depictions of the life of Jesus attracted fame and criticism, glory and infamy, but they resonated with the burgeoning culture of an educated middle class and the rise of mass culture. A more humane Jesus was appropriated by a secularizing culture in its attempt to engage critically and counter traditional Christian theologies.

Recent historiography has challenged Schweitzer's genealogy along at least two lines. The first looks at historical representations of the life of Jesus before Reimarus, whereas the second aims to be more inclusive, paying attention to different confessional and national contexts in which these representations were produced. Indeed, the last decades have witnessed a wealth of academic research, characterized by new approaches to the historical Jesus "before Reimarus",⁵ influenced by a novel interest in theories and notions of religion in the early modern period and its representations of early Christianity. The Protestant Reformation, geographical exploration and missionary policies all contributed to the deepening of religious strife. Interest in religion grew. Committed philologists and brilliant apologists from different religious communities engaged in defining the notion of Christianity and establishing the biography of Jesus. New iconographies of the Nazarene circulated on title pages and as book illustrations, albeit often in a clandestine context, pictorially marking a shift from representation of the divine to representation of the human nature of Jesus. From the second half of the 17th century and in the first decades of the 18th century an enormous amount of literature about Jesus and Christianity circulated both officially and clandestinely. As we seek to recover the Jewish context of Jesus as imagined by scholars and theologians of the early modern period, we can usefully combine different media, from texts to images, to detect various sensibilities concerning Jesus as a Jew and therefore as a man.

If we are to fully appreciate the richness of early modern scholarship on these topics, a more inclusive approach will surely be required, one capable of grasp-

4 A number of recent studies have drawn attending to this text; see Richard 2015; Priest 2015. For a more general account for the 19th century see Moxnes 2012.

5 For example, the Annual Meeting on Christian Origins held in Bertinoro, Italy, cf. <https://cissr.net>; and the *Journal of the Historical Jesus*, published by Brill. For similar approaches critical of Schweitzer's account, see Salvatorelli 1929; and before, Labanca 1900.

ing and conveying how scholars belonging to different communities of faith performed their historical quest on such charged theological themes. Jewish and Catholic writers and Protestant scholars of various confessions left interesting traces of their understandings of Jesus's lived historical context. Their work could achieve vast clandestine circulation and become part of a library shared by religious reformers and enlightened thinkers, not to mention fervid critics of Christianity.

Our interest in this specific issue, the product of an intense exchange at the European Association for the Study of Religions conference for 2016, held in Helsinki, is intended to provide insight into the representation of Jesus in the early modern age and beyond, deliberately extending the focus to overlooked media. While we welcome analysis of textual traditions embedded in prints, manuscripts and marginalia, alongside authorized and authorial perspectives, we encouraged scholars to present counter-narratives and challenging views, focusing on other forms and fields of representation such as visual material or archival sources, in order to establish a more intricate picture of both multiple representations of and contrasting theories about the figure of Jesus.

The collection of articles presented here contains various methodological lines of inquiry. At the same time, it brings together, albeit very selectively, the early modern and modern periods even up to the second half of the 20th century; we believe that this selection of case studies offers a composite view of varied, and often contrasting, practices of historiographical writing, which belong to different religious, anti-religious and neutral traditions that span across the centuries. We sought to add an additional and new perspective based on communication theory, focusing on the relationship between different media and on their communicative potential and historical imagination. The emphasis on the medium – be it a manuscript, an illustration or a film – was intended to encourage new modes of representing historical themes, which, we hope, will allow new interpretations and an innovative evaluation of the impact of scholarship on religion, shedding light on scholarship's failures as well as on its ability to resonate with a wider public.

Our perspective thus points to the role of media and also offers insight into often-neglected marginal or allegedly marginal narratives, such as, for example, Jewish voices on the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. Indeed, this themed issue opens with two articles on Jewish interpretations of Jesus before the emergence of a “scientific discourse” that were taken up in the early modern period and used by different communities with diverse cultural agendas.

Miriam Benfatto's article is devoted to an early modern text on Jesus that has received too little attention thus far and to how we can understand religious themes through polemical discourse. Her contribution seeks to uncover the figure of Jesus hidden by the polemical and apologetic strategy of a book known under the title *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* (*Strengthening of the Faith*). This

powerful study, which generated an early historical consciousness in its description of the Nazarene, was written at the end of the 16th century, at a time of confessional and interreligious confrontation involving Jews and Christians. The treatise was authored by Isaac ben Abraham Troki (c. 1533–1594) in the multi-confessional Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In her essay Benfatto discusses central issues tackled by the Lithuanian Karaite scholar, such as the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as Jesus' humanity, messiahship and Jewishness. The *Sefer Hizzuq Emunah* offered a noteworthy representation of Jesus from a particular Jewish perspective, using an exegetical and historical method and basing its argument on analysis of the Gospels. As Benfatto illustrates, the text circulated widely in Europe through clandestine networks, was translated into several languages before the end of the seventeenth century and was influential for freethinkers such as Reimarus and Voltaire.

In his article, Daniel Barbu also deals with anti-Christian polemical literature, but of a very different emotionally engaging type. A parodic, subversive retelling of the Gospel tradition, *Toledot Yeshu* (*The Jewish Life of Jesus*) is a narrative of remarkable cogency and was a bestseller in its period. Against the background of early modern life and thought, the essay offers an engaging introduction to and discussion of this story and of its wide dissemination through multiple oral and written channels, not least through the first printed editions, published by professor of Oriental languages Johann Christoph Wagenseil and the Swiss theologian Johann Jacob Huldreich in 1681 and 1705 respectively. Barbu investigates the use of *Toledot Yeshu* as deliberate response and challenge to Christian dogma, situating it in the context of counter-history and identity. Narratives such as this functioned within a minority culture as a form of resistance and challenge to the dominant discourse. The impact and power of humor and mockery as effective forms of polemic are highlighted. Barbu reads and treats the many manuscript versions as historical and social artefacts and analyses early modern contexts previously underappreciated. He writes about adaptations and interpretations, about the reception and circulation of *Toledot Yeshu* among both Jews and Christians, exploring the effects of a narrative that was condemned as infamous and impious while at the same time being broadly discussed by Christians as a fascinating and thought-provoking text.

From textual and exegetical narratives aimed at ridiculing or criticizing hegemonic Christian interpretations of the life of Jesus, this issue turns in its next article to Catholic sacred antiquarianism. Paola von Wyss-Giacosa introduces the reader to a tract on the shroud of Besançon as an example of early modern discourse about relics. With its polemical overtones, the historic debate over relics of Jesus is very relevant to our present perspective on various counts. Such artefacts were a medium that played an important part in disseminating allegedly authentic (and therefore sacred) images of Jesus, considered by be-

lievers to be not representations but rather direct traces of the divine and thus invested with a unique performative power. More generally, the approach allows us to recognize the role of textiles as powerful and controversial parts and products of cultural practice. At the center of Wyss-Giacosa's essay is the book *De linteis sepulchralibus Christi servatoris crisis historica* (*About a historical decision on the burial shrouds of Christ the Savior*, Antwerp, 1624), a hitherto neglected treatise in which the Besançon physician and scholar Jean-Jacques Chifflet wrote about a competitor of the shroud of Turin, a large cloth preserved in the Franche-Comté capital that was considered to hold an "imprint" left by Christ's body on his burial linen. More specifically, the article focuses on the highly effective illustrative strategy deployed by the author in his argument for his local shroud. Discussion of the cloth's rendering in a remarkable engraving is accompanied by analysis of the high circulation, use and impact of Chifflet's selection of images, and the broad implications of their reception.

Visual imagery also has a significant role in the last two articles. They deal with the modern period, offering analyses of the Gospel narrative as conveyed through the prism of the new medium of cinema. Cristiana Facchini's article explores the relationship between select early silent films devoted to the life of Christ and the historiographical debate about the "historical Jesus" that had been so influential throughout the nineteenth century. Both were a product of the impact of modernity on religion: while the former was indicative of the historical turn and an increased interest in precisely reframing the history of Christianity through a methodologically sound analysis of the past, the latter was the outcome of technological innovation's exploitation of the possibilities for the re-presentation of the past for a wider audience. The article explores the interaction between these realms of modern culture, claiming that in terms of representations of religion and a historical past, the trajectories of the "historical Jesus" and the "cinematic Christ" had features in common as they became public knowledge for an incipient mass culture, although they deployed different methodologies and analytical devices in order to convey historical realism. While scholarship exploited the powerful tools of philology and textual analysis that were combined with increasing attention to how historical sources might be used, cinematic depictions relied upon visual imagery, music and a literal transposition of the Gospel narrative. Facchini's essay offers new insight into these two historical imaginations, observing that although the two representations might share certain features and overlap, more often they generated different results and contradicted each other.

Finally, the last article, by Nicola Martellozzo, deals with what is probably the most famous film on this topic, *IL VANGELO SECONDO MATTEO* (*THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MATTHEW*, IT/FR 1964) by Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini. Viewed against the backdrop of the highly conflictual politics of Italy's post-war period, the film is analyzed partly as the outcome of a long process of ne-

gotiation between Pasolini, an influential intellectual close to the Communist party, on one hand, and Catholic groups inspired by the renewal of the Catholic Church, on the other. The article offers a new understanding of how Pasolini created the narrative of a film that was often praised by Catholic critics as a literal transposition of the Gospel's narrative and therefore as an accurate and historically sound rendering. Martellozzo gives a semiotic analysis of musical motifs in the film, showing how the soundtrack was carefully interwoven with the textual and visual dimensions of the narrative, creating an "architecture of reality" which reinforced the message Pasolini aimed to convey. The musical syntax that Pasolini construed throughout the film creates "consonant scenes", tied together by musical motifs that convey chains of meaning, which go far beyond the literal sense of the Gospel. The film director successfully connects the text of the Gospel of Matthew with a new web of meanings that reach the viewer and offer a more complex image of the life of Jesus. In doing so, Pasolini strengthens the theological undertext while also presenting the viewer with a personal message through a complex game of intertextuality.

Overall, this thematic issue seeks to provide a more nuanced and more complicated history of how historical narratives about the life of Jesus were produced and circulated in European culture. The focus on media is one of the most innovative ways to provide such an involved history, pointing to the cultural history of scholarship and the many ways in which societies produce historical representations of theological themes.

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